

THE WITHERED FIG TREE

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A SERMON
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AT THE METROPOLITAN TABERNACLE, NEWINGTON

“And He left them and went out of the city into Bethany. And He lodged there. Now in the morning as He returned into the city, He hungered. And when He saw a fig tree in the way, He came to it and found nothing thereon but leaves only, and said unto it, Let no fruit grow on you henceforward forever. And presently the fig tree withered away. And when the disciples saw it, they marveled, saying, How soon is the fig tree withered away!”
Matthew 21:17-20.

THIS is a miracle and a parable. We have books upon the miracles, we have an equal number of volumes upon the parables—into which of these volumes shall we place this story? I would answer, put it in both! It is a singular, miracle and it is a striking parable. It is an acted parable, in which our Lord gives us an object lesson. He gets truth before men's eyes, in this instance, that the lesson may make a deeper impression upon the mind and heart. I would lay great stress upon the remark that this is a parable; for, if you do not look upon it in that light, you may misunderstand it. We are not of those who come to the Word of God with the cool impertinence of the critic, thinking ourselves wiser than the Book, and therefore able to judge it. We believe the Holy Spirit is greater than man's spirit, and that our Lord and Master was a better judge of what is right and good than any of us can be. Our place is at His feet—we are not cavilers but followers. Whatever Jesus does and says, we regard with deepest reverence; our chief desire is to learn as much as we can from it. We see great mysteries in His simplest actions and profound teaching about His most plain words. When He speaks or acts, we are like Moses at the bush and feel that we stand on holy ground.

Flippant persons have spoken of the story before us in a very foolish manner. They have represented it as though our Lord, being hungered, thought only of His necessity, and expecting to be refreshed by a few green figs, went up to the tree in error. Finding no fruit upon the tree, it being a season when He had no right to expect that there would be any, He was vexed and uttered a malediction against a tree as though it had been a responsible agent! This view of the case results from the folly of the observer—it is not the truth of God. Our Lord desired to teach His disciples concerning the doom of Jerusalem. The reception given Him in Jerusalem was full of promise, but it would come to nothing. Their loud hosannas would change to, “Crucify Him!”

When Jerusalem was to be destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar in a former time, the prophets had not only spoken, but they had used instructive signs. If you turn to the Book of Ezekiel, you will there see the record of many signs and symbols which set forth the coming woe. These tokens excited curiosity, secured consideration, and brought home the prophetic warnings to the homes and hearts of the common people. Again, the judgments of God were at the gates of the guilty city. Words—the words of Jesus—had been wasted; and even tears—tears of the Savior—had been spilt in vain. It was time that the sign should be given—the sign of condemnation. Ezekiel had said, “All the trees of the field shall know that I, the Lord, have brought down the high tree, and has dried up the green tree.” And herein was suggested the very image which was employed by our Lord. He saw a fig tree, by a freak of nature, covered with leaves at a time when, in the ordinary course of things, it should not have been so. Our Lord saw that this was a fine object lesson for Him, and therefore He took His disciples to see if there were figs as well as leaves. When He found none, He bade the fig tree remain forever fruitless, and immediately it began to wither. Our Lord would have used the fig tree to excellent purpose had He ordered it to be used as fuel to warm cold hands—but He did better when He used it to warm cold *hearts*. No wrong was done to any man. It was a tree on the waste, and utterly worthless. No pain was inflicted. No anger was felt. In the object lesson, the Lord simply said to the fig tree, “Let no fruit grow on you henceforward forever.” And it withered away. In this our Lord taught a great lesson to all ages at a small expense. The withering

of a tree has been the quickening of many a soul; and if it had not been so, it was no loss to any that a tree should wither when it had proved itself barren. A great teacher may do far more than destroy a tree, if he can thereby give demonstrations of truth and scatter seeds of virtue. It is the most idle of criticism to find fault with our Lord Jesus for a piece of fine poetic instruction, for which, had it been spoken by any other teacher, the most lavish praise would have been awarded by these very critics.

The blighted fig tree was a singularly apt simile of the Jewish state. The nation had promised great things to God. When all the other nations were like trees without leaves, making no profession of allegiance to the true God, the Jewish nation was covered with the leafage of abundant religious profession. Scribes, Pharisees, priests, and elders of the people were all sticklers for the letter of the law, and boasted of being worshippers of the one God, and strict observers of all His laws. Their constant cry was, "The temple of the Lord; The temple of the Lord; The temple of the Lord, are these."

"We have Abraham as our Father" was frequently on their lips. They were a fig tree in full leaf. But there was no fruit upon them; for the people were neither holy, nor just, nor true, nor faithful towards God, nor loving to their neighbor. The Jewish church was a mass of glittering profession, unsupported by spiritual life. Our Lord had looked into the temple and had found the house of prayer to be a den of thieves. He condemned the Jewish church to remain a lifeless, fruitless thing; and it was so. The synagogue remained open. But its teaching became a dead form. Israel had no influence upon the age. The Jewish race became, for centuries, a withered tree—it had nothing but profession when Christ came, and that profession proved powerless to save even the holy city. Christ did not destroy the religious organization of the Jews—He left them as they were; but they withered away from the root till the Romans came, and with the axes of their legions cleared away the fruitless trunk.

What a lesson is this to nations! Nations may make a profession, a loud profession of religion, and yet may fail to exhibit that righteousness which exalts a nation. Nations may be adorned with all the leafage of civilization, art, progress, and religion—but if there is no inner life of godliness, and no fruit unto righteousness, they will stand for a while, and then wither away.

What a lesson this is to churches! There have been churches which have stood prominent in numbers and in influence. But faith, love, and holiness have not been maintained, and the Holy Spirit has left them to the vain show of a fruitless profession; and there stand those churches, with the trunk of organization and widely-extended branches, but they are dead and every year they become more and more decayed. Brethren, such churches we have even among Nonconformists at this hour. May it never be so with this church! We may have numbers of people coming to hear the word, and a considerable body of men and women professing to be converted; but unless vital godliness is in their midst; what are congregations and churches? We might have a valued ministry, but what would this be without the Spirit of God? We might have large subscriptions, and many outward efforts, but what of these without the spirit of prayer, the spirit of faith, the spirit of divine grace and consecration? I dread lest we should ever come to be like a tree, precocious with a superlative profession—but worthless in the sight of the Lord because the secret life of piety and vital union to Christ are gone. Better that the axe clear away every vestige of the tree than that it stand out against the sky an open lie, a mockery, a delusion!

This is the lesson of the text; but I do not want you to consider it only in its relation to nations and churches. My heart's desire is that we may learn the lesson in detail and take it home, each one, to his heart. May the Lord Himself speak to each one of us this morning personally! In preparing the sermon, I have had great searching of heart, and I pray that the hearing of it may produce the same results. May we tremble, lest, having a profession of godliness, we should wear it conspicuously, and yet should lack the fruit-bearing which alone can warrant such a profession. The name of saintship, if it is not justified by sanctity, is an offense to honest men, and much more to a holy God. A pronounced and forward avowal of Christianity without a Christian life at the back of it is a lie, abhorrent to God and man, an offense against truth, a dishonor to religion and the forerunner of a withering curse!

May the Holy Spirit help me to preach very solemnly and powerfully at this time!

Our first observation is this—There are in the world cases of forward, but fruitless, profession; our second observation will be this—These will be inspected by King Jesus; and our third remark will be—The result of that inspection will be very terrible. Help us, O Holy Spirit!

I. First, then, THERE ARE IN THE WORLD CASES OF FORWARD, BUT FRUITLESS, PROFESSION.

The cases to which we refer are not so very rare. They far excel their fellow men. Their promise is very loud, and their exterior very impressive. They look like fruitful trees; you expect many baskets of the best figs from them. They impress us by their talk. They overpower us by their manners. We envy them and lash ourselves. This last might not harm us; but to envy hypocrites can never be otherwise than injurious in the long run; for, when their hypocrisy is discovered, we are apt to despise religion as well as the pretenders to it. Do you not know persons who are in appearance everything, and in reality nothing? O dark thought! May we not ourselves be such persons? See the man: he is strong in faith, even to presumption; he is joyous in hope, even to levity; he is loving in spirit, even to utter indifference about the truth of God! How very glib he is in talk! How deep he is in theological speculation! Yet he has never entered the kingdom by the new birth; he has never been taught of God. The gospel has come to him in word only. He is a stranger to the work of the Holy Spirit. Are there not such persons? Are there not persons who are defenders of orthodoxy, and yet are heterodox in their own conduct? Do we not know men and women whose lives deny what their lips profess? We are sure it is so; all vineyards have had in them fig trees covered with leaves, which have been conspicuous from the foliage of their profession, and yet have brought forth no fruit unto the Lord.

Such persons seem to defy the seasons. It was not the time of figs, yet was this fig tree covered with those leaves which usually betokened ripe figs. I suppose you all know what I have often seen for myself—the fig tree puts forth its fruit *before* its leaves. Early in the year you see green knobs put forth at the end, and points of the branches—and these, as they swell, turn out to be green figs. The leaves come forward afterwards, and by the time the tree is fully covered with leaves, the figs are ready for eating. When a fig tree is in full leaf, you expect to find figs upon it; and if you do not, it will bear no figs for that season. This tree put forth leaves abundantly before its season, and therein excelled all other fig trees. Yes, but it was a freak of nature, and not a healthy result of true growth; such freaks of nature occur in forests and in vineyards; and their like may be met with in the moral and spiritual world. Certain men and women seem far in advance of those around about them, and astonish us by their special virtues. They are better than the best—more excellent than the most excellent—at least in appearance. They are so zealous that they are not chilled by the surrounding world—their great souls create a summer for themselves. The backwardness of saints, and the wickedness of sinners, do not hinder them; they are too vigorous to be affected by their surroundings; they are very superior persons, covered with virtues, as this fig tree with leaves.

Observe that they overleap the ordinary rule of growth. As I have told you, the rule is, first the fig, and afterwards the fig leaves; but we have seen persons who make a profession before they have produced the slightest fruit to justify it! I like to see our young friends, when they believe in Christ, proving their faith by holiness at home, by godliness abroad, and *then* coming forward and confessing their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. That looks to be the sober and normal way of proceeding—for a man first to *be*—and then to *profess* to be; first to be lighted, and then to shine; first to repent and believe, and then to confess repentance and faith in the scriptural way—by baptism into Christ. But these people think it unnecessary to attend to the trifle of heart-work—they dare to omit the most vital part of the matter. They attend a revival meeting and they declare themselves saved, though they have not been renewed in heart, and possess neither repentance nor faith. They come forward to avow a mere *emotion*! They have nothing better than a resolve; but they flourish it as if it were the deed, itself. Quick as thought the convert sets up to be a teacher; without test or trial of his brand new virtues, he holds himself forth as an example to others. Now, I do not object to the rapidity of the conversion—on the contrary, I admire it, if it is true; but I cannot judge till I see the fruit and evidence in the life. If the change of conduct is distinct and true, I care not how quickly the work is done; but we must see the change. There is a heat which leads to fermentation, and a fermentation which breeds sourness and corruption. O dear friends, never think you may skip the fruit and come at once to the leaf! Be not like a builder who should say, “It is all nonsense to spend labor and material on works underground; foundations are never seen. I can run up a house in no time—four walls and a roof will not take long.” Yes, but how long will such a house last? Is it worthwhile building a house without foundations? If you omit the foundation, why not omit the house altogether? Is there not a tendency, especially in these days, when men are either skeptical or fanatical to cultivate a mushroom godliness, which comes up in a night and perishes in a night? Will it not be ruinous if conviction of sin is slighted, repentance slurred, faith imitated, the new birth counterfeited, and

godliness pretended? Beloved, this will never do! We must have figs *before* leaves, acts *before* declarations, faith *before* baptism, and union to Christ *before* union with the church. You cannot leap over the processes of nature; neither may you omit the processes of divine grace, lest haply your foliage without fruit becomes a curse without cure.

These people usually catch the eye of others. According to Mark, our Lord saw this tree “afar off.” The other trees were not in leaf and consequently, when He began to go up the hill toward Jerusalem, He saw this one tree quite a long way before He reached it. A fig tree dressed in its vesture of lovely green would be a striking object, and would be observable at a distance. It stood, also, near the track from Bethany to the city gate. It stood where every wayfarer would observe it, and probably speak with wonder of its singular leafage for the season. Persons whose religion is false are frequently prominent, because they have not grace enough to be modest and retiring. They seek the highest room, aspire to office, and push themselves into leadership. They do not walk in secret with God—they have little concern about private godliness—and so they are all the more eager to be seen of men. This is both their weakness and their peril. Though least of all able to bear the wear and tear of publicity, they are covetous for it, and are therefore all the more watched. This is the evil of the whole matter—for it makes their spiritual failure to be known by so many, and their sin brings all the greater dishonor upon the name of the Lord, whom they profess to serve. It is better far to be fruitless in a corner of a forest, than on the public way which leads to the temple.

Such people not only catch the eye, but they often attract the company of good men. Who blames us for drawing near to a tree which is in leaf long before its fellows? Is it not right to cultivate the acquaintance of the eminently good? Our Savior and His disciples went up to the leafy fig tree—not merely did it win their eye, but it drew them to itself. Have we not been fascinated by the charming conduct of one who seemed to be a brother in the Lord, more devout than usual, fearing God above many? Like Jehu, he has said, “Come see my zeal for the Lord.” And we have been glad enough to ride in the chariot with him—he seemed so godly, so generous, so humble, and so useful—that we looked up to him and wished that we were more worthy to be associated with him. Young converts and seekers are naturally apt to do this; and therefore it is a sad calamity when their confidence turns out to have been misplaced.

Whenever we see any standing out prominently and making a bold profession, what should be our thoughts about them? I answer: do not judge them—do not fall into habitual mistrust. Your Lord did not stand at a distance and say, “That tree is worthless.” No, He went up to it with His disciples, and carefully inspected it. These prominent persons may be wonders of divine grace—let us hope and pray that they may be. Let the Lord and His love be magnified in them! God has His fig trees that bear figs in winter; God has His saints who are filled with good works when the love of others has waxed cold. The Lord raises some up to be as standards for the truth of God, rallying points in the battle. The Lord can make young men mature, and new converts useful. It has been said, by way of proverbial expression, that “some men are born with beards.” The Lord can give great grace, so as to make spiritual growth rapid and yet solid. He does this so often that we have no right to doubt but what the prominent brother before us is one of these growths of divine grace. Unless we are forced to see with bitter regret that there are no marks of grace, no evidences of faith, let us hope for the best, and be glad at the sight of God’s grace. If we are inclined to be suspicious, let us turn the point of that sword towards our own bosoms. Self-suspicion will be healthy—suspicion of others may be cruel! We are not judges; and even if we are, we had better keep to our own court and sit on our own judgment seat, dispensing the law within the little kingdom of our own selves.

Where those who are prominent turn out to be all they profess to be, they are a great blessing. It would have been well if that morning there had been figs upon that fig tree. It would have been great refreshment to the Savior if He had been fed by the green fruit. When the Lord makes the first in position, to be first in holiness, it is a blessing to the church, to the family, and to the neighborhood. Indeed, it may prove to be a blessing to the whole world. We ought, therefore, to pray the Lord to water with His own hand those trees which He has planted. Or, in other words, to uphold, by His grace, those men of His right hand whom He has made strong for Himself.

But when we take the text and lay it home to our own hearts, we need not be as gentle with it as in the cases of others. We have, many of us, for long years been like this fig tree, as to prominence and profession. And in this matter, so far, there is nothing of which to be ashamed. Yet it is evidently to our-

selves that the parable speaks; for we have stood in open avowal and distinct service by the wayside and we have been seen “afar off.” Certain of us have made a very bold profession, and we are not ashamed to repeat that profession before men and angels. Therefore the inquiry—Are we truthful in it? What if we should turn out to be contending for a faith in which we have no share? What if in us there should be none of the life of love, and consequently our profession should be “as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal”? What if there should be talk and no work—doctrine and no practice? What if we are without holiness? Then we shall never see the Lord. Whatever terrible aspect this parable-miracle may have, it bears upon many of us! I, the preacher, feel how much it bears upon me. In that spirit have I thought it over, anxiously trusting that every deacon and every elder of this church, and every member and every worker among you, may have great searching of heart. I pray every minister of Christ who may have dropped in here this morning, will say to himself, “Yes, I have been like that fig tree in prominence and in profession—God grant that I be not like it in being devoid of fruit!”

II. It is time that we remembered the solemn truth of our second head—THESE WILL BE INSPECTED BY KING JESUS.

He will draw near to them, and when He comes up to them He will look for fruit. The first Adam came to the fig tree for leaves, but the Second Adam looks for figs. He searches our character through and through, to see whether there is any real faith, any true love, any living hope, any joy which is the fruit of the Spirit. He searches for any patience, any self-denial, any fervor in prayer, any walking with God, and any indwelling of the Holy Spirit; and if He does not see these things, He is not satisfied with chapel attendance, church attendance, prayer meetings, communions, sermons, Bible readings; for all these may be no more than leafage. If our Lord does not see the *fruit of the Spirit* upon us, He is not satisfied with us, and His inspection will lead to severe measures. Notice that what Jesus looks for is not your words, not your resolves, not your avowals—but your sincerity, your inward faith, your being, indeed, worked upon by the Spirit of God to bring forth fruits meet for His kingdom!

Our Lord has a right to expect fruit when He looks for it. When He went up to that fig tree He had a right to expect fruit; because the fruit, according to nature, comes before the leaf. If, then, the leaf has come, there should be fruit. True, it was not the time of figs; but then, if it were not the time of figs, it certainly was not the season for leaves, for the figs are first. This tree, by putting forth leaves, which are the signs and tokens of ripe figs, virtually advertised itself as bearing fruit. So, however bad the times may be, some of us profess that we will not follow the times, but will follow the one immutable truth. As Christians, we confess that we are redeemed from among men, and have been delivered from this perverse generation. Christ may not expect fruit of men who acknowledge the world and its changing ages as their supreme guide; but He may well look for it from the believer in His own word. He looks for fruit from the preacher, from the Sunday school teacher, from the church officer, from the sister who conducts a Bible class, from that brother who has a band of young men around him, to whom he is a guide in the gospel. Christ expects it of all who submit to His gospel rule. As Christ had a right to expect fruit of a leaf-bearing fig tree, so He has a right to expect great things from those who avow themselves His trustful followers. Ah, me, how this fact should move the preacher with trembling! Should it not affect full many of you in the same manner?

Fruit is what the Lord earnestly desires. The Savior, when He came upon the fig tree, did not desire leaves; for we read that He hungered, and human hunger cannot be removed by leaves of a fig tree. He desired to eat a fig or two; and He longs to have fruit from us, also. He hungers for our holiness—He longs that His joy may be in us, that our joy may be full. He comes up to each of you who are members of His church, and especially to each of you who are leaders of His people, and He looks to see in you the things in which His soul is well-pleased. He would see in us love to Himself, love to our fellow men, strong faith in the Word of God, earnest contention for the once delivered faith, importunate pleading in prayer, and careful living in every part of our course. He expects from us actions such as are according to the law of God and the mind of the Spirit of God; and if He does not see these, He does not receive His due. What did He die for but to make His people holy? What did He give Himself for but that He might sanctify unto Himself a people zealous of good works? What is the reward of the bloody sweat and the five wounds, and the death agony—but that by all these we should be bought with a price? We rob Him of His reward if we do not glorify Him, and therefore the Spirit of God is grieved at our conduct if we do not show forth His praises by our godly and zealous lives!

And mark here, that when Christ comes to a soul, He surveys it with keen discernment. He is not mocked. It is not possible to deceive Him. I have thought that to be a fig which turned out to be only a leaf was a mistake—but our Lord makes no such mistake. Neither will He overlook the little figs just breaking forth. He knows the fruit of the Spirit in whatever stage it may be. He never mistakes fluent expression for hearty possession, or real grace for mere emotion. Beloved, you are in good hands as to the trial of your condition when the Lord Jesus comes to deal with you. Your fellow men are quick in their judgments, and they may be either censorious, or partial; but the King gives forth a righteous sentence. He knows just where we are, and what we are; and He judges not after the appearance, but according to truth. Oh, that our prayer might this morning rise to heaven—“Jesus, Master, come and cast Your searching eyes upon me, and judge whether I am living unto You or not! Give me to see myself as You see me, that I may have my errors corrected, and my graces nourished. Lord, make me to be, indeed, what I profess to be; and if I am not so already, convict me of my false state, and begin a true work in my soul. If I am Yours and am right in Your sight, grant me a kind, assuring word to sink my fears again, and I will gladly rejoice in You as the God of my salvation.”

III. I come, thirdly, by the help of the Spirit of God, to consider the truth of God, that THE RESULT OF THE COMING OF CHRIST TO THE FORWARD, BUT FRUITLESS PROFESSOR, WILL BE VERY TERRIBLE.

The searcher finds nothing but leaves where fruit might have been expected. Nothing but leaves means nothing but lies. Is that a harsh expression? If I profess faith and have no faith, is not that a lie? If I profess repentance and have not repented, is not that a lie? If I unite with the people of the living God and yet have no fear of God in my heart, is not that a lie? If I come to the communion table and partake of the bread and wine, and yet never discern the Lord’s body, is not that a lie? If I profess to defend the doctrines of grace and yet am not assured of the truth of them, is not that a lie? If I have never felt my depravity; if I have never been effectually called, never known my election of God, never rested in the redeeming blood, and have never been renewed by the Spirit, is not my defense of the doctrines of grace a lie? If there is nothing but leaves, there is nothing but lies, and the Savior sees that it is so! All the verdure of green leaf to him without fruit is but so much deceit. Profession without divine grace is the funeral pageantry of a dead soul. Religion without holiness is the light which comes from rotten wood—the phosphorescence of decay. I speak dread words, but how can I speak less dreadfully than I do? If you and I have but a name to live and are dead, what a state we are in! Ours is something worse than corruption—it is the corruption of corruption! To profess religion and live in sin is to sprinkle rosewater upon a dunghill and leave it a dunghill, still. To give a spirit an angel’s name when it bears the devil’s character, is almost to sin against the Holy Spirit. If we remain unconverted, of what use can it be to have our name written among the godly?

Our Lord discovered that there was no fruit, and that was a dreadful thing; but, next, He condemned the tree. Was it not right that He should condemn it? Did He curse it? It was already a curse. It was calculated to tantalize the hungry, and take them out of their way to deceive them. God will not have the poor and needy made a jest of; an empty profession is a practical curse, and should it not receive the censure of the Lord of truth? The tree was of no use where it was—it ministered to no man’s refreshment. So, the barren professor occupies a position in which he ought to be a blessing, but, in truth, an evil influence streams forth from him. If he has not the grace of God in him, he is utterly useless, and in all probability he is a curse—he is an Achan in the camp, grieving the Lord, and causing Him to refuse success to His people.

Our Lord did, however, use the fig tree for a good purpose when He caused it to wither away; for it became, from then on, a beacon and a warning to all others who put forth vain pretenses. So, when the ungodly man who has exhibited a flourishing profession, is allowed to fade away in his ways, some moral effect is produced upon others—they are compelled to see the peril of an unsound profession; and if they are wise, they will no longer be guilty of it. Would God it might be so in every case whenever a notable religionist withers away!

After that, when the Savior had condemned it, He pronounced sentence upon it. And what was the sentence? It was simply, “As you were.” It was nothing more than a confirmation of its state. This tree has borne no fruit—it shall never bear fruit; if a man chooses to be without the grace of God, and yet to make a profession of having it, it is only just that the great Judge should say, “Continue without divine

grace.” When the great Judge at last shall speak to those who depart from God, He will simply say to them, “Depart!” Throughout life they always were departing, and after death their character is stamped with perpetuity. If you choose to be graceless, to be graceless shall be your doom! “He that is filthy, let him be filthy still.” May the Lord Jesus never have to sentence any of you in this way; but may He turn us, that we may be turned, and work in us eternal life to His praise and glory!

Then there came a change over the tree. It began at once to wither. I do not know whether the disciples saw a quiver run through it at once; but on the next morning when they passed that way, according to Mark, it had dried up from the roots. Not only did the leaves hang down like streamers, when there is no wind; not only did the bark seem to have lost every token of vitality—but the whole fabric was fatally blighted! Have you ever seen a fig tree with its strange, weird branches? It is a very extraordinary sight when bare of leaves. In this case I see its skeleton arms! It is twice dead, dead from the very roots. Thus have I seen the fair professor undergo blight. He has looked like a thing that has felt the breath of a furnace, and has had its moisture dried up. The man is no longer himself—his glory and his beauty are hopelessly gone. No axe was lifted, no fire was kindled—a word did it—and the tree withered from the root. So, without thunderbolt or pestilence, the once brave professor is stricken as with the judgment of Cain. It is an awful fate. Better far to have the vine-dresser come to you with an axe in his hand, and strike you with the blade of it, and say to you, “Tree, you must bear fruit, or be hewn down.” Such a warning would be terrible, but it would be infinitely better than to be left in one’s place untouched, quietly to wither to destruction.

Now I have delivered my heavy burden, laying it far more upon myself than upon any of you; for I stand more prominent than you; I have made a louder profession than most of you; and if I have not His divine grace in me, then I shall stand before the multitude that have seen me in my greenness, and shall wither away to the very roots—a terrible example of what God does with those who bear no fruit to His glory!

And now I desire to conclude with more tender words. Let no man say, “This is very harsh.” Brother, it is not harsh, is it, that if we profess a thing, we should be expected to be true to it? Besides, I pray you not to think that anything my Lord can do is harsh. He is all gentleness and tenderness. The only thing He ever did destroy was this fig tree. He destroyed no men, as Elijah did when he brought fire from heaven upon them; or as Elisha did when the bears came out of the woods. It is only a barren tree that He causes to wither away. He is all love and tenderness—He does not want to wither you, nor will He, if you are but true. The very least He may expect is that you are true to what you profess. Are you rebellious because He asks you not to play the hypocrite? If you begin to kick against His admonition, it will look as if you were yourself untrue at heart. Instead of that, come and bow humbly at His feet, and say, “Lord, if anything in this solemn truth bears upon me, I beseech You so to apply it to my conscience that I may feel its power and flee to You for salvation.” Many men are converted in this way—these harsh but honest things drive them from false refuges, and bring them to be true to Christ, and to their own souls.

“But,” says one, “I know what I will do; I will never make any profession—I will bear no leaves.” My friend that also is a sullen, rebellious spirit! Instead of talking so, you should say, “Lord, I do not ask You to take away my leaves, but let me have fruit.” The fruit is not likely to ripen well without leaves—leaves are essential to the health of the tree, and the health of the tree is essential to the ripening of the fruit. Open confession of faith is good, and must not be refused. Lord, I would not drop a leaf—

*“I’m not ashamed to acknowledge my Lord,
Or to defend His cause;
Maintain the honor of His word,
The glory of His cross.”*

Lord, I do not want to be set away in a corner; I am satisfied to stand where men may see my good works and glorify my Father who is in heaven. I do not ask to be observed; but I am not ashamed to be observed—only, Lord, make me fit for observation. If a commander said to a soldier, “Stand firm, but mind you, have your cartridges ready so that you may not lift an empty gun,” and suppose that soldier answered, “I cannot be so particular; I would rather run to the rear”—would that be a fit reply? Coward! Because your captain warns you that you must not be a sham, you would therefore run off altogether? Surely, you are of an evil sort. You are not truly one of the Lord’s, if you cannot bear His rebuke. Let

not these solemn truths of God drive us away, but let them draw us on to say, “Lord, I pray You, help me to make my calling and election sure. I beseech You, help me to bring forth the expected fruit. Your grace can do it.”

I would suggest to everyone here cry to the Lord to make us conscious of our natural barrenness. Gracious ones, may the Lord make us mourn our comparative barrenness, even if we do bear some fruit. To feel quite satisfied with yourself is perilous—to feel that you are holy, and indeed, that you are perfect, is to be on the brink of the pit of pride. If you hold your head so high, I am afraid you will strike it against the top of the doorway; if you walk on stilts, I fear you will fall. It is a safer thing to feel, “Lord, I do serve You, and I am no deceiver. I do love You; you have worked the works of the Spirit in me; but alas, I am not what I want to be, I am not what I ought to be. I aspire to holiness—help me to attain it. Lord, I would lie in the very dust before You to think that after being dug about and fertilized, as I have been, I should bear such little fruit. I feel myself less than nothing. My cry is, ‘God be merciful to me.’ If I had done all, I would still have been an unprofitable servant; but having done so little, Lord, where shall I hide my guilty head?”

Lastly, when you have made this confession, and the good Lord has heard you, there is one emblem in Scripture I should like you to copy. Suppose this morning you feel so dry, and dead, and barren that you cannot serve God as you would, nor even pray for more divine grace, as you wish to do? Then you are something like these twelve rods. They are very dead and dry, for they have been held in the hands of twelve chiefs, who have used them as their official staves. These twelve rods are to be laid before the Lord. This one is Aaron’s rod; but it is quite as dead and dry as any of the rest. The whole twelve are laid in the place where the Lord dwells. We see them next morning. Eleven are dry rods still. But see this rod of Aaron! What has happened? It was dry as death. See, it has budded! This is wonderful! But look, it has blossomed! There are almond flowers upon it! You know they are rosy pink, and white. This is marvelous! But look again, it has brought forth almonds! Here, you have them! See these green fruits which look like peaches? Take off the flesh, and here is an almond whose shell you may break and find the kernel. The heavenly power has come upon the dry stick, and it has budded and blossomed and even brought forth almonds! Fruit-bearing is the proof of life and favor. Lord, take these poor sticks this morning, and make them bud. Lord, here we are, in a bundle—perform that ancient miracle in a thousand of us. Make us bud and blossom and bear fruit! Come with divine power and turn this congregation from a stick into a grove! Oh, that our blessed Lord may get a fig from some dry sticks this morning! At least, such a fig as this, “God be merciful to me a sinner.” There is sweetness in that fig, and as this, “Lord, I believe, help You my unbelief.” Here is another, “Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him”—that is a whole basket full of the first ripe figs, and the Lord rejoices in their sweetness. Come Holy Spirit, produce fruit in us this day, through faith in Jesus Christ our Lord! Amen and Amen.

Portions of Scripture Read before Sermon—Matthew 21:12-32.

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